

## GOOD MORNING, MRS. LARRABEE!

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# GOOD MORNING, MRS. LARRABEE!

By Lida L. Greene

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Mrs. William Larrabee, wife of William Larrabee, thirteenth governor of Iowa, sits *at home* daily in the west wing of the Historical Building. She would like us to say that, I think. Take one look at the bust sitting to the right of his excellency, the governor, and you will understand. The face of Anna Larrabee is warm and welcoming, even in its sheath of plaster, and there is a touch of high humor about it that one sees only in a woman who knows her world and is content with it.

It is quite true that Mrs. William was *at home* daily. Wherever Anna Larrabee set up her household, whether Clarmont or Des Moines, there was tea at four o'clock in the afternoon. Adults laid aside books, papers and piles of mending. The tea pot was warmed, the sponge cake sliced and a fresh pot of gooseberry jam opened for the stack of homemade bread still deliciously warm from the oven. Children were called in from playing one-old-cat and admonished to wash their hands nicely. If you had dropped by to ask the governor a question about railroad rates, you would have found yourself, tea cup in hand, a part of the enlivening conversation around the Larrabee circle.

I stop, occasionally, to greet the governor's wife on my way to the Library. "Good morning, Mrs. Larrabee!" A pleasant sight at 7:30 a.m.—the Larrabee smile, the hair drawn back softly and caught with a fine, high comb. Here was a woman who could mother an apron-load of turkey poults caught in a summer shower, whip up a batch of calves' foot jelly for an ailing senator, or know what to say when a political ally came by with a scolding look in his eye that meant trouble for William. Yes, here was a woman!

You can understand that knowing Anna Larrabee prompted the Library's interest in other first ladies of Iowa. We began by reading biographies of the state's chief executives, made a detour into the Aldrich and Fulton scrapbooks and finished by haunting the stacks in the Newspaper Division.

Too often we discovered a first lady became a kind of abrupt statistic in the life of a man who was going places. She married a man about to become important. That was all. Where was the description that made her a person? Was she wise and witty, we wanted to know. Was she able to stretch a family dinner and make it a festive meal for the unexpected guest? Did she read the romances of Sir Walter Scott or the poetry of Robert Browning? Could she tread lightly and discreetly the ways of the social world? Was there a pot of hot chocolate waiting when the Man came home from the office? Could she lend her strength to her husband when political disappointment came? Where were the answers?

For a while we thought we would have to start an Association for the Appreciation of Former First Ladies. Instead we began to write letters. The roster of recipients was long. It included great grandchildren of governors, the grand niece of a first lady, a local chapter of the Daughters of the Daughters of the American Revolution, librarians, the session of a Presbyterian church, county historical societies. Replies came back slowly, but they came.

The first treasure to arrive was the copy of a daguerreotype found in Burlington, a delightful picture of Elizabeth Sarah (Neally) Grimes, her face haloed by a poke bonnet. Since then there have been other photographs and bits of biography, enough to encourage us to hunt for more.

If there were time we would introduce you to the whole receiving line of first ladies, beginning with Friendly Lucas who crossed the Mississippi when Iowa City was a raw, awkward village. Some day you must meet them. They are all well worth knowing: Friendly (Sumner) Lucas, Christiana (Dodge) Clark, Nancy (Dunlap) Briggs, Lavina (Lackland) Hempstead, Elizabeth Sarah (Neally) Grimes, Phoebe (Carleton) Lowe, Jane (Clark) Kirkwood. . . .

Or perhaps you have a first lady of Iowa in your own background. Is there a *tin type*, a clipping or a story never yet published? We hope you'll share them with us. In the meantime, when you are across the street from the State House, stop in at the Library. We would like very much to introduce you to Mrs. William Larrabee. Remember, she is *at home* daily to her friends, the people of Iowa.

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